

# **RUNNING HEAD: NAVIGATING APPROACHES TO VISUAL CULTURE**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I attempt to map how visual culture is presently impacting art education. It takes as its starting point the parent fields of visual culture in art education: Cultural Studies, Material Cultural Studies, and contemporary art practice, as well as an eclectic approach being pioneered by art educators themselves. While there are different emphases among these approaches; equally, there are many similarities, and the differences can be viewed as complimenting each other. The four approaches are viewed as alternatives, not competitors.

## **Navigating Approaches to Visual Culture in Art Education**

In this paper I attempt to map how visual culture is emerging as a proposal for a new paradigm for visual arts education. As with any new development in education, the emergence of this paradigm is accompanied by criticism

and confusion. Understanding what visual culture in art education is, or could be, requires some deft navigational skills. The need for such navigational skills has become increasingly evident as the field grows in scope and as different art educators draw upon different intellectual and practical traditions. I propose to examine how visual culture is emerging in art education by having recourse to the parent fields of visual culture in art education: Cultural Studies, Material Cultural Studies, and contemporary art practice. As well, I will discuss an approach that, while indebted to these fields of study, appears homegrown among art educators. The approaches are viewed as complimenting one another, not as in conflict or as competitors. The examples given in this paper are highly selective, it no longer being possible to refer to all the work being undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

## Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies has been especially influential on the relatively new field of Visual Culture Studies. While a complex, interdisciplinary field, drawing as it does on many disciplines such as sociology, literature and popular culture studies, ethnography and semiotics, Cultural Studies is principally informed by the emphasis of critical theory on issues to do with power (eg, Hall, 1996; Williams, 1981). Society is viewed as conflictual, where power is distributed asymmetrically and society is considered to be inherently unfair and unjust. Always there is a struggle between competing groups, and where the struggle is not undertaken by force it is undertaken through sign systems such as visual imagery. Vying for power is seen as a constant struggle. As Grossberg (1996) puts the issue, "...ideology is a contested terrain" (p. 160). Cultural Studies attempts to hold in balance an understanding of people's lived, subjective experience and the structural dynamics of society. It attempts to understand the pleasures people are able to take in sign systems even when they are not, in any objective way, facilitative of their wider interests. At the same time Cultural Studies seeks to grasp people's

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<sup>1</sup> Another recent paper follows a similar structure to this paper (Duncum, 2004). In this paper, however, I have used different examples and come to a somewhat different position, emphasising not the differences between approaches but their complementarity.

understandings in terms of the social, economic and political pressures and processes that help determine subjectivity; in short, it examines “the politics of pleasure” and the “politics of consumption” (McRobbie, 1996, p. 241). Its concerns are “both ‘out there’, changing our conditions of life, and ‘in here’ working on us” (Hall, 1996, p. 227). Because it is founded on a conflictual view of society, Cultural Studies does not study humanity *per se* or whole societies; it studies conflicts within and between societies and is therefore inherently political.

The recent field of Visual Culture Studies as informed by Cultural Studies therefore understands images as sites of ideological struggle, sites through which groups either attempt to maintain power or gain ascendancy (Barnard, 1998). Like Cultural Studies, it makes no *a priori* distinction of value between conventionally high and low cultural forms, and Visual Culture Studies embraces both the art of the professional artworld and the imagery of corporate, now global, capital. It embraces television, the Internet, film and painting and sculpture, for example. As well, it examines, potentially, all the conditions under which we look and see, all the locations in which people view imagery and the social relationships that exist between viewer and the objects viewed (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001).

The study of visual culture is motivated, first, by the tendency of post-modern society to picture knowledge, attitudes and beliefs in what Debord (1967/1977) called “the society of spectacle”. Visual images have not replaced words, of course, but they play an unprecedented role in both the worlds of work and leisure. And as Baudrillard (1987) observes, images increasingly refer to each other rather than referring to or expressing an otherwise constituted reality. For many people images have become a kind of reality, as much a part of the real world as any other part (Jameson, 1998). This is a new historical development. What is not new is that, as Plato observed long ago, imagery can be highly seductive. Taken together, these two observations — the seductiveness of imagery and its unprecedented use — make for a powerful argument for education in the use of imagery.

Tavin's (2002) work on a *Diesel* jean advertisement is clearly indebted to Cultural Studies. He worked with an advertisement that appropriated a famous photograph of the Yalta conference of 1945, which shows President

Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and Premier Stalin sitting on the deck of a ship. Several young female models have been digitally inserted so that they appear draped around these famous patriarchal, military leaders. Tavin asked his students whether they thought the advertisement trivialised women as sexual objects, whether it and others like it help shape understanding of the role of women in society, and if the unequal power relationships between the men and women in the photograph is replicated by us as viewers / voyeurs of the women. This discussion led to the creation of a hypertext in which aspects of the advertisement were linked to other historical and contemporary references such as images of Roosevelt from *Life Magazine* and pictures of President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. Icons of power such as militarism, machinery and totalitarianism were investigated that juxtaposed men and women, viewers and viewed, and the complex position of the viewer as simultaneously a voyeur and consumer.

Examples of other art educators indebted to Cultural Studies include: Taylor and Ballangee-Morris (2003) on situation comedies; Pauly's (2003) student work on Disney's *Little Mermaid* and *GI Joe*; Duncum (1997) on soap operas, Tavin, Lovelace, Stabler and Maxam (2003) on *McDonald's* restaurant layouts, *Niketown* store displays, American Girl dioramas, the representation of human disabilities in films, and media violence.

Both an advantage and disadvantage of the Cultural Studies approach to visual culture is that it deals directly with the cultural sites with which students are engaged as part of their daily lives. Being grounded in student experience it is likely to be seen by students as relevant to their lives; yet, at the same time, it may be understood as an invasion into and occupation of their own culture — a large part of which has to do with resisting the adult world (Larrain & Hernández, in-press). The approach also involves a fundamental reordering of priorities for art education, quite different kinds of teacher training and in-service, different material resources and different, and arguably more extensive, teacher knowledge.

## Material Culture Studies

The field of Material Culture Studies offers an alternative to a Cultural Studies approach, though one with as many, if not more, challenges to traditional art

education practice. While Cultural Studies focuses on widely acknowledged communicative modes such as television, Material Culture Studies is much more inclusive. It goes beyond artefacts that are intended to be symbolic to embrace artefacts that are intended to be purely utilitarian. It includes “all artefacts, from the simplest, such as a common pin, to the most complex, such as an interplanetary space vehicle” (Deetz, 1977, p. 24), “from a pot to a city” (Berger, 1992, p. 8).

The range of artefacts to be studied is therefore exceptionally wide; indeed, the word *things* is the principal way in which its focus is defined. Material culture includes whatever artefacts we can see, touch and smell as well as all the human practices that surround artefacts, all the ways in which we use, share, talk about and make them (Dant, 1999). Clearly, this is far more inclusive than signifying systems.

Like Visual Culture Studies, Material Culture Studies is complex and multidisciplinary, and is similarly subject to constant theoretical reworking. Scholars draw upon, for example, craftspeople, engineers of technology, art historians, folklorists, cultural geographers; yet, they have in common the project that they “learn from things” (Kingery, 1996, p. 1). Some scholars concentrate on aspects of artefacts that are intentionally communicative, much in the way that students of Cultural Studies and Visual Culture Studies do. Other scholars, however, focus on characteristics that are only inadvertently expressive of underlying patterns of belief (Prown, 1996). Such artefacts are seen as “figurative documents” (Dupont, 1991, p. 1). In other words, Material Culture Studies examines not only signifying systems but also artefacts that have no obvious communicative function until they are appropriated by scholars as communicative. Still, again, some artefacts are studied not because they even only incidentally communicate, but simply because they help to determine the patterns of our lives. Examples include pins and paperclips.

Also different from Visual Culture Studies, where the focus is typically on electronic and two-dimensional media, Material Culture Studies tends to focus on the material nature of artefacts. As befitting its name, it is interested in the physical material characteristics of objects: “the ways in which various parts of an object are fabricated and joined, composition, surface texture,

internal structure, sources of raw materials” (Kingley, 1996, p. 14). The issue of how artisans exploit the materials used follows from a study that encompasses the widest possible range of artefacts made from the longest possible list of materials.

For Material Culture scholars the interest in material things, nomatter of what kind, lies in the observation that we not only use materials things to express who we are but material things help to determine how we live on a daily basis. Scholars study to remember how “the small things — the seemingly little and insignificant things... accumulate to create a lifetime” (Deetz, 1977, p. 161), and how we use objects as markers of meaning. We use our imaginations to constantly interpret and reinterpret our physical surroundings and, in a reciprocal way, we feed our imaginations with the physical world of objects. As sign making creatures it is as if we are incapable of not making something of even the most prosaic object. Thus the connection between even the most banal of artefacts and identity is a fundamental feature of human action and social experience.

Material Culture Studies is undergoing theoretical revision but until recently it tended to adopt a functionalist view of society and to study artefacts in terms of what they told us about whole societies, even humanity. Unlike Cultural Studies, which adopts a conflictual view of society, Material Culture scholars have tended to treat concepts like society and humanity as undifferentiated and unproblematic. However, consistent with the current theoretical fluidity of Material Culture Studies this is not true of the following study by art educator Congdon and her surfing nephew King (2002).

They examine a wide range of surf culture artefacts in terms of their meaning to their users. They examine surfboards, skateboards, wetsuits, T-shirts, posters, movies, videos, swimsuits and shorts, and competition trophies, as well as ritual practices such as surfer girls sitting in lines facing the water and braiding each other’s hair. These artefacts and practices are considered in terms of the pleasures that surfing afforded — the sensations of riding waves for example — and how such artefacts help to identity and distinguish surfers from other groups such as skateboarders who have their own distinctive artefacts. Some of the artefacts included are ostensibly functional; others are clear examples of signifiers and, yet Congdon and King

appropriate the all as markers of meaning. Each is understood in terms of lived experience and as signs of identity.

Other examples of art educators drawing upon Material Culture Studies to study contemporary imagery include Fher (2000) on life in the back of lowriders, Conrad (2003) on her own personal items like her ID card and date book, Chen (2003) on comic fan culture, Webb (2002) on tourist attractions, and Ballangee-Morris (2002) on tourist souvenirs. Bolin (1992/1993) reviews many art educational studies on popular and folk culture in terms of material culture, and Bolin and Blandy (2003) list numerous other studies by art educators on artefacts as diverse as children's toys, roadside attractions, kit crafts, customised cars, Amish quilts, home gardens, and public buildings.

The benefit of a Material Culture Studies approach lies in its inclusiveness. Any object at all can be regarded as helping to determine the quality and character of daily life. No boundaries are established; no objects are excluded. Also, in stressing the material characteristics of artefacts, Material Culture Studies is aligned with the interests of the traditional studio practitioner. However, when curriculum time is precious, the question needs to be asked: Should the study of things that are sometimes not primarily of interest to students be made a priority by teachers? Studying pins and paperclips, for example, seems arbitrary simply because they are material artefacts and can be seen as helping to influence our lives or because through acts of the imagination they can be made to mean something. Is the focus of Material Culture Studies just too broad for art education in schools? Is the inclusiveness of Material Culture Studies also a shortcoming for Art Education? Or is the problem overcome by being selective, as, indeed, so must those who advocate from a Visual Culture Studies position?

## **Reconciling Visual Culture Studies and Material Culture Studies**

Material Culture Studies and Visual Culture Studies differ in a number of respects. Material Culture Studies focuses largely on three-dimensional artefacts and includes utilitarian objects that only inadvertently communicate values and beliefs, and it tends to adopt a functionalist view of society. It often regards objects as expressive of societies as a whole or even humanity,

and is, therefore, apolitical. Visual Culture Studies restricts itself to the study of acknowledged signifying systems, tends to focus on two dimensional artefacts, and includes the study of the conditions of viewing rather than the physical characteristics of artefacts. By adopting a view of society as inherently unequal and unfair and understanding artefacts in terms of power struggles it is unavoidably political.

Nevertheless, the two fields of study have much in common and their differences can in most cases be seen as complimentary. Insofar as they influence art education they can be regarded as supplementing each other, and I will argue shortly that art educators are drawing upon them in just this way.

First, to combine the study of two and three-dimensional artefacts is not new; rather, for art educators it has long been central to our practices. Secondly, art education can, and does, now combine the overtly symbolic images and artefacts deliberately and clearly intended as a channel of communication with artefacts that appear to have a purely functional purpose and only inadvertently communicate meaning. Put another way, art education appropriates artefacts as if they are meaningful. Thirdly, stressing the conditions of viewing and stressing the material nature of artefacts is not mutually exclusive but merely a matter of different emphases. Finally, the study of society as conflicted and the study of humanity is equally a matter of choice since the study of images as strategies of power and the study of images as a means to convey human conditions is equally legitimate. Within any society at any time images are a means to influence thoughts and events but they can also be used to show that despite many differences between disparate people, there are some aspects of the human condition that appear universal and perennial and they can be used to develop tolerance towards others. Images can be studied both in terms of what they tell us about our differences and what they tell us about our similarities.

## **Contemporary Art Practice**

A third and popular approach art educators have adopted toward visual culture is to model their practice after contemporary art practice and critique. The artworld now not only archives the best of the past but in what Williams



(1981) calls post-market conditions it is enabled to critically examine the dominant culture. Relatively free of commercial pressures the artworld interrogates the visual imagery that constitutes the ideology of corporate capital. Since serious art has long offered a critique of society, it is not surprising that a society that is now significantly expressed in visual terms should be grist to the mill for visual artists. As part of this process the artworld has incorporated many of the visual tactics of the commercial world, and at the same time the commercial world borrows extensively from the fine arts so that the boundaries that once separated fine from popular art have become blurred (Sullivan, 2002). Instead of seeing the commercial world as an anathema to art education, art educators are now able to view it through the critical eyes of their parent discipline. Also, just as the commercial world has become saturated with imagery, the professional artworld has taken on a more strident critique of society, making much of postmodern art practice grounded in critical inquiry. And related to this development, just as general society becomes more visual, many artists have stopped making pictures and begun performing (Garioan, 2002) and, according to Desai (2002), adopting roles as diverse as archaeologists, ethnographers, facilitators of community art projects, educators and even bureaucrats. Thus, both the process of critical inquiry that now characterises much of the professional artworld and its investigation of visual culture offers a model for a new art education. Also offered is a radically different model of studio practice than practised by most art educators at present.

It is argued that since all the great artists of the past have given drama to everyday life and helped us to consider its importance, and since everyday life is now a forest of media signs, it is to be expected that artists are recycling media images. By way of illustration Nadander (2002) is concerned with the power of the media to determine adolescent viewing of body shape. Living through a culture of video, zines, and cyberculture, he sees youngsters, especially girls, adopting unhealthy eating habits in an effort to obtain the current fashion for thinness. Finding few healthy alternative images in the media, Nadaner turns to the professional artworld for a critique of media images and finds it in the work of Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Lorna Simpson. He finds in Kruger's posters images that turn media

stereotypes back upon themselves, in Sherman's photographs evidence of the sheer effort required to construct media stereotypes of women, and in Simpson's texts and images, further critiques of how the media represent types rather than people. Nadaner also notes that artists such as Lucian Freud who paint the body in "unflattering" ways offer alternatives to the media. Nadaner suggests that through studying media images and alternatives from art, students can begin to think about their bodies in a variety of ways and through making images themselves they can express their ideas in creative ways.

Other examples of art educators using this approach are Taylor and Ballengee-Morris (2002) who examined artists who have commented on consumerism, Wyrick (2002) who investigates with her students how artists have appropriated and critiqued news media in their work, and Jeffers (2002) whose students created an installation of a bedroom filled with media images of violence.

Inherent with this approach is a critical perspective. As well, the approach is derived from the parent field of art education, namely the professional artworld itself. These are two strong arguments in its favour. On the other hand, in dealing with popular visual culture indirectly the danger is that students will perceive it to be a means of downplaying the importance of their own cultural experience in favour of the cultural capital of others.

## **An Art Education Approach**

In practice, art educators appear to be drawing upon each of these strands to create their own approach. They appear to be establishing connections between the professional artworld, both its archive of the past and its current innovations, and the world of contemporary visual and material culture. For example, in proposing programs I have suggested starting from TV wrestling and used it to read back into art history, discovering that big and posturing muscular men carrying severed heads and fighting with snakes — recent features of the genre — have long historical precedents (Duncum, 2002). I have encouraged students to ask of TV wrestling questions like: Does masculinity have to involve bravado and violence? How do stereotypes of race and foreign nationals help diminish an understanding of others? I have

suggested making images that constitute other values such as men who are strong and gentle.

My graduate students at the University of Illinois have recently examined such cultural sites as reality TV, ice hockey, popular religious artefacts, violent video games, tattoos, Manga, and Las Vegas. In each case, students found not only historical precedents that helped illuminate their site, but devised critical questions that helped school students to ground studio activities in an understanding of the wider context of these sites. For example, Audrey Rizio's students developed hypertextual investigations into the meaning of Barbie and the notion of bodily perfection. Starting with a Barbie doll her students drew upon such disparate material as official sales figures and the demography of Barbie consumers, other media images of women like Brittany Spears, fine art images of women by artists like Rubens, articles on Barbie, and professional artists' responses to Barbie, their own drawn, visual responses, and their own written reflections. In creating their own hypertext, they made connections that were uniquely their own while creating pathways that allowed others to make their own connections; in short, they created typical postmodern art forms.

Others who are developing an eclectic art education approach through hypertext include Taylor (2000) and Taylor and Carpenter (2003) who are indebted to Wilson's (2000) work on hypertexts. In each case their students employ hypertext to range freely across fine and popular art, both past and present and whose starting point can be fine art, popular art, an idea, an issue, a written text, almost anything that sparks investigation of further ideas and images. Others who are developing an eclectic approach include Gude (2000) on nudity, Sharpe (2003) on new technologies, Congdon and Blandy (2003) on zines, and Stewart (2003) on the film *The Matrix* as a postmodern primer.

## Summary

While art educators are today influenced variously by Cultural Studies, Material Culture Studies and contemporary professional art practice, they appear to be devising their own highly eclectic approach to visual culture. I believe that each of these fields offers valuable perspectives that can be

used to compliment one another. Art education appears to be developing in a way that acknowledges today's student experience of a world very much more visual than ever before. This places art education centre-stage in the school curriculum. Rather than marginalised, art education is beginning to position itself so that it has the potential to become a major player in the distribution of curriculum time and resources.

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